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Learning online at the feet of India's gurus

By Zubair Ahmed
BBC News, Chennai



Musical interlude: For devotees of traditional Indian music and dance, there could be a cheaper way of learning from the experts than forking out for a plane ticket

It was a melodious spectacle.

The guru or master and his disciple had launched into a duet - drumming - rather pounding - vigorously in complete harmony on a clay pot.

The pot is an ancient Indian instrument called a ghatam.

The only oddity was that they were playing thousands of miles apart - the guru in India's southern city Chennai (Madras) and the disciple in Tokyo. And it was on Skype.

Distance learning

Online tuition through live video chat devices is becoming a popular medium of learning Indian classical dance, music and instruments in the Western world and beyond.

The Japanese student, Kunotaka Aki, believes there's no substitute for one-on-one learning, but that live video interaction is the best option in the given circumstances.

Says Mr Aki on Skype from Tokyo during a break in the class: "In writing it takes a long time to understand one sentence. But with Skype, with sound and with clap, it's easier for us to understand the long composition."

His teacher Suresh Vaidyanathan, who has students in many parts of the world, says live video chat facilities have greatly promoted Indian carnatic music.

The ghatam, he adds, is a unique and rare instrument and "there's a great demand for ghatam classes on Skype in the West".



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Suresh Vaidyanathan with his ghatam - an ancient Indian musical instrument

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His shaven head and broad frame give him the look of a heavyweight boxer.

Heavy weight he is, but of the clay pot. He is synonymous with his instrument and that's why "they call me Ghatam Suresh".

Shall we dance?

Online learning is trending in the virtual world.

Music and dance maestros in many Indian cities have linked up on Skype and other live video technology with students overseas, to teach them classical dance and music.

Chennai seems to have more online gurus than other places.

Indira Kadambi and her husband TV Ramprasad have gone a step further in online teaching, and have established a virtual music and dance school in Chennai.

Be it the intricate body movement of Bharatnatyam dance or the high-pitched carnatic ragas, online modules are available.

Says Indira Kadambi: "Gurus are not available everywhere. Even if they are, quality education is not available. The online medium makes programmes (lessons) easily available."

Husband TV Ramprasad concurs, adding: "In online teaching [students] can see it well, interaction happens with students in many countries and they can learn properly."

But can distance learning over online video communication services be as effective as during face-to-face sessions?

The husband and wife duo believes distance learning doesn't reduce the ability to learn or teach.

Foreign affair

Many foreign students are either professional musicians in their own countries, or trying to establish themselves in the world of music and dance.

A French woman, who was learning classical southern Indian ragas from her teacher, Vidya Subramanian, is a jazz player in her country.

She says she is learning ragas "from Vidya with a view to improvising and using it whenever I can in jazz. It'll give me an edge".

Youthful Vidya Subramanian returned to her home town Chennai three years ago having lived and worked in the US for 15 years, to raise her children in India.

She left a lucrative career as a chartered accountant but quickly re-established herself in Chennai in classical singing.

Today she is a leading online teacher of classical singing. She works alongside a group of teachers to impart training to eager students overseas.

"I have no regrets. I had to look after my family. So, I decided to take up online teaching from home."

Vidya Subramanian says working from home allows her to look after her children, and gives her the freedom to choose what time she wants to take classes.

But it also gives her an adequate income. She says she doesn't need to go back to her former profession.

An hour-long session may cost a student anywhere between \$10 and \$50, depending on a variety of factors, including a student's needs and their financial circumstances.

India once had a great tradition of disciples learning at the feet of their gurus. That tradition seems to have been revived - in virtual world - thanks to technology.



Kunotaka Aki (on screen) in class in Tokyo with his ghatam teacher, Suresh Vaidyanathan, in Chennai



Improved technology has seen an increase in online teaching



Teaching online means that Vidya Subramanian can also look after her children at home

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